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AUTHOR Davidson, Fred
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ABSTRACT

Present composition teaching and testing techniques do not formally capture student improvement across essays. Contract learning, a procedure in which student essays are error-analyzed for repeated mistakes, can do so. Correction of those repetitions becomes a set of goals on a written contract signed by the teacher and student, and the student works to accomplish the goals by the end of the term. Contract fulfillment may involve either remediation or self-motivation. Fulfillment is based on a slowing, stoppage, or reversal of error trends by the term's end. Contract results provide a new, individualized, criterion-referenced source of measurement information to be integrated with other criterion-referenced (task based) and norm-referenced (rank based) sources in an advancement decision using multiple references. Examples are given of this technique, based on 2 years of experience with the contract learning procedure. (Author/MSE)

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TEACHING AND TESTING ESL COMPOSITION THROUGH CONTRACT LEARNING
(third draft)

Fred Davidson, U.C.L.A.

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ABSTRACT

Present composition teaching/testing techniques do not formally capture student improvement across essays. Contract learning (after Parkhurst, 1922) can do so. It is a procedure where student essays are error analyzed for repeated mistakes, those repetitions become goals on a written contract signed by the teacher and student, and the student works to remove those difficulties by the end of the term. Contract fulfillment may involve remediation and/or may be self- motivated. Fulfillment is judged based on a slowing, stoppage, or reversal of error trends by the end of the term. Contract results provide a new, individualized, self-criterion referenced source of measurement information. That source can be integrated with criterion-referenced (task based) and norm referenced (rank based) sources in a multiply referenced advancement decision. Examples are given in this paper of just such an integration; the data for the examples follow two years of experience with the contract learning procedure.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper proposes a general framework for improvement of longitudinal ESL composition teaching and testing. Implicit in the following arguments is the acknowledgement that present composition measures do not show ongoing improvement characteristics of an ESL composition student. A teacher who uses a single-shot measure, for example a score on an essay's final draft, captures necessary information but may miss the process behind that essay's production; this is a complaint often heard among composition specialists who support the study of process rather than product. The procedure described in this paper goes a step further. Not only is study of the single-essay process necessary, but also worthy of attention is the longitudinal improvement profile a student exhibits across many essays and many topics. This paper offers a procedure to do so: contract learning.

In so doing, it will become evident that such a procedure does not fit neatly with any current measurement option. Multiple referencing is a framework in which the longitudinal contract procedure may be integrated with other measures, be they of process, or of product. In addition to arguing for contract learning, this paper argues for the formalization of multiple referencing as a means of utilizing the unique information contracts provide, in conjunction with whatever measurement techniques a teacher may already employ.

2. BACKGROUND: THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

Contract learning is useful as a longitudinal teaching/testing technique because it can accomodate two features of composition improvement. These two features emerge only when one studies a student's improvement profile across many essays.

Before describing those features, a definition is in order. A learning contract is a written agreement which the student and teacher sign. It specifies the goals the student should achieve within a stated time period, and describes the "payment" for fulfillment, which need be no more than a desirable grade. (For the beginning of the contract learning literature, see Parkhurst, 1922; for an overview of types of contracts, see Berte, 1975.) Contract learning is not a panacea for all of the ills of ESL composition, but it is especially helpful when one considers the features of ESL composition skill development that are only evident across many essays.

That trans-essay domain exhibits two striking features, each suited to contract learning. The first is interstudent differences in rate of improvement. Refinement of writing skills is a recursive, nonlinear phenomenon.* Success is often matched by shortfall. With a flexible goal- communicating device such as a contract, the success rate difference

*Recursiveness in ESL attainment is a central tenet of a powerful current theoretical framework: Monitor Theory and the Input Hypothesis (see Krashen, 1983).

between students can be accomodated. Contract renegotiation can permit a student to strive for attainment many times. In this author's experience with learning contracts, rarely were two students at the same point in contract fulfillment at any given time, and rarely did students have the same number of contract renegotiations.

Contract learning addresses a second feature of longitudinal ESL composition skill development: interstudent differences in particular skill areas needing attention. For one student a certain subskill may be problematic, while for another it is not. Such differences can be studied under the theoretical framework of Error Analysis (c.f. Corder, 1967; Nemser, 1971; Selinker, 1972). Error Analysis is an approach to determine the significance of learner linguistic developmental difficulties. It states that skill areas most worthy of pedagogical attention are those delineated by a repeating pattern of accumulated difficulties. In contract learning, repeated mistakes taken from a student's writing can be set before the student as contract goals to be fulfilled.* These two longitudinal features adressed by contract learning imply that a contract is both a teaching and a testing technique, and that it is individualized. It

*It should be noted that the term "mistake" is being used in a very broad sense. Furthermore, this application of Error Analysis is not meant be a negative motivator, i.e. overemphasis on mistakes is of course not desirable. In the contract system, this author has found that not to be the case, since (1) contracts are but one component of a larger class, and (2) students may want to focus their attention on their mistakes.

teaches (1) via clear communication between teacher and student and (2) by providing tailoring of the class to the needs of the individual. It tests by offering a self generated criterion against which attainment can be checked: the repeated difficulties. In current testing literature, contract learning would appear to be criterion referenced, for it measures against a task rather than against a rank (which is known as norm referencing. For a comparison of norm and criterion referencing see Popham 1978.)

However, contract learning is not strictly criterion referenced, and that claim points out the need for the multiple referencing framework mentioned earlier. Contract learning may or may not involve similar task goals for all class members. If the same contract goal were put before all students n a class, then it would indeed be a criterion referenced measurement technique. But if, as has been this author's experience, goals vary drastically across students, contract learning is more properly self-criterion referenced. Self-criterion referencing (SCR) may be defined as measurement against a task derived from the needs profile of a single student. As such it is a non-group information source to be balanced against a group-task source (criterion referencing- -CR), and a group-rank source (norm referencing--NR), when the teacher makes an advancement decision. That balancing is the act of multiple referencing. Multiple referencing may be defined as the utilization of all sources

of measurement information that impinge on a student's advancement. Figure 1 diagrams multiple referencing; it includes the three measurement information sources mentioned above and acknowledges the existence of other sources (the definition of which this author is pursuing is current research):

FIGURE 1:

The Multiple Referencing Measurement Framework*

Since contract learning does not properly fit in with either CR or NR, a new superordinate measurement information category is needed: multiple referencing.

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*It may be more appropriate to subclassify CR into GROUP CR and SCR, as suggested by Brian Lynch (personal communication). However, this diagram does not represent NR and CR as they are usually differentiated in testing literature: as conditions on score interpretation. Rather, it gives the sources of measurement available to the teacher. It is a diagram of sources, not interpretations.

The next section outlines a multiply referenced application of contract learning in ESL composition classes.

3. APPLICATION

3.1 METHOD

Over the past two years, this author has used contract learning as an integral part of six ESL composition classes. Each class was university or pre-university ESL. Each was a heterogeneous group with mixed success rates and varying needs, the two features described above. Contract learning never formed the entire course; however, it always had a substantive role. Lectures and discussions on ESL composition skills, use of exemplar analysis, inductive questioning--all were methods complemented by contract learning.

In each course, the actual contract goals were determined from error analytic counts on the students' writing. A single contract for a single student is shown in Figure 2; the goals are hypothetical, but they represent frequently observed student profiles.

Learning Contract

I understand that the following points have been identified as needs in my compositions. I further understand that if I eliminate these difficulties by the end of the term, then I will have fulfilled a major goal of this course: self-guided writing improvement.

Contract Goals:

1. use of indentation
2. specificity of supports for the main idea
3. use of articles
4. spelling
5. efficiency: use of time while writing
6.
7.

signed,

(student) (date)

witnessed,

(teacher) (date)

Figure 2: Sample Contract

Students could, and did differ in the number of renegotiations, and the specific goals contracted. In addition, contract goals differed across courses as a reflection of syllabus changes. As much as possible the Error Analysis counting was done by the students, in an effort to reduce teacher workload; this proved to be a motivating factor of individual student responsibility. In general, the contract procedure went as follows: (1) the teacher would mark the essays with some sort of error code system, (2) the student would keep a count of repeated symbols, and (3) those repeated symbols would become the contract goals which the student would work to eliminate. The number of essays prior to the first contract varied from class to class, but always sought to identify true trends in student needs. Roughly, in a term with 12-16 essays, 1/4 to 1/3 were written before the first contract.

Remediation occured via three avenues. First, although contract learning permits individual tailoring to capture student success rate and need differences, some agreement usually existed across class members, with respect to actual contracted goals. For example, a certain grammar point might have been problematic in the writing of many students. Thus remediation was often possible through actual class lessons on shared contract goals. Second, remediation was offered via individual teacher guidance written on essays or renegotiated contracts, or in private conferences. Ulti-

mately, though, the most satisfying remediation was somewhat mysterious: given a clear identification of needs, given a contract, given a modicum of class or teacher help, improvement often resulted from outside work. In such a case, the contract procedure had a unique value: self-motivated self-teaching.

Contract fulfillment was judged based on reversal of trends. Regardless of the number of renegotiations, all contracts and essays were turned in at the end of the term. The teacher would then study each student's contract, essays, and if employed, error count. If a definite slowing, stoppage, or reversal had occurred on a given goal, that goal was labeled "fulfilled."

3.2 ADVANCEMENT DECISION

Fulfilled contract points were then used as one information source in a multiply referenced end-of-term advancement decision. This section describes how that was done.

First, however, it is necessary to reemphasize the individualization of the contract learning system. It would be somewhat misleading to include a "results" discussion here, which focused on the average number of fulfilled vs. contracted points in classes using this system. Syllabus changes across terms meant that the wording of contract goal points often differed across applications. That is, for one class a particular goal might be phrased differently than

for another, or it may be subsumed under another goal, or it may be absent entirely. Thus it is not possible to study the domain of composition skills based on contract data results because the system was individualized to the needs of particular individuals in particular classes. Instead, this section describes the use of contract results as an additional source of information impinging on the advancement decision: a multiple referencing decision activity.

Consider the data in Table 1. This is hypothetical information about contract fulfillment based on experience with this system in six ESL classes.

Student 1	G1	(G2)	(G3)	(G4)	G5	G9	G11	G13
Student 2	(G2)	G4	G5	(G8)				
Student 3	(G1)	G5	(G10)	G11				

Table 1: Hypothetical Contract Fulfillment Data, for three students in one ESL composition class: G1, G2, ..., Gn represent contracted goals, and parentheses indicate fulfillment.

Note the fulfilled goals in parentheses. Imagine that G2 represents the correct use of the past perfect. The parentheses indicate that two of the three students experienced difficulty with that composition subskill, but that by the end of the term that difficulty had slowed noticably, stopped, or reversed (i.e. superior use of that form). Other goals in parentheses may be intrepreted similarly. Goals

not in parentheses represent unfulfilled points; they are still evident as difficulties by the end of the term. For an example of an unfulfilled point, note G5.

Consider further student 3. Imagine that at the end of the term her final exam composition score places her at the top of the class. In addition, imagine that she had consistently demonstrated mastery of a majority of the objectives represented by several criterion referenced short quizzes. Although some of her unfulfilled needs may be critical at the next level of ESL (e.g. G5), do they mean she should not be advanced?

Consider also student 1. Imagine that at the end of the term he placed at the class mean on that final composition exam. At the beginning of the term he placed at the bottom of the class on a norm-referenced diagnostic take-home essay. The teacher sensed that he would be a challenge. Note that less than 1/2 of his contract points appear fulfilled. What is to be done? Consider adding in the following information: is half a contract indicative of an improvement curve that will continue into the next ESL level? How critical are those points he fulfilled versus those he did not? With respect to norm referenced information, is a score at the class mean usually sufficient evidence for advancement? Was this a particularly high or low class, and if either, does that change the interpretation of the mean? Considering the criterion-referenced information, does his perfor-

mance on quizzes indicate mastery of objectives? Were his contract points worded in such a way to link to those objectives (i.e. link CR and SCR), and indicate mastery or non-mastery?* The claim here is that running such a series of questions through one's mind is the decision activity of multiple referencing. That activity is one that teachers engage in intuitively, but it is not formalized in measurment systems which rely heavily on a test.

4. CONCLUSION: SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper does not argue a specific course of advancement action for Students 1 and 3. Further, any action about Student 2 is left to the reader's imagination.

Rather, this paper's focus is the raw concept of contract learning. Experience with this system has convinced the author that its application in individual cases will vary greatly, with respect to the force it has in the multiply referenced advancement decision. Independent of any specific application, the advantages of contract learning still appear strong. This procedure addresses a measurement source that is not formally tapped by any other instrumentation, namely individualized attainment. As such, contract learning demonstrates the need for the multiple referencing

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*Consider information outside the NR-CR-SCR options: What is the next ESL level, if any? What is his major, and what does his major imply regarding a composition load?--Such questions as these might be the type of considerations under "Other" in Figure 1, a classification this author's research is currently pursuing.

decision activity outlined above.

In addition, contract learning addresses four characteristics of ESL compositon teaching and testing: (1) interstudent differences in success rate and needs can be accomodated, (2) the potential for self motivated learning is high, (3) there is a need for multiply referenced measurement information sources, and as will be described in detail below, (4) SCR data imply some new information for future research.

SCR data is a new multi-student source of longitudinal information. Across several academic terms, self-mapping of the idiosyncratic, recursive, nonlinear development toward fluency could be charted on a sort of SCR Performance Chart. Performance chart data could provide an outside validity check on norm and criterion referenced data, which in turn could validate SCR. Perhaps "other" (c.f. Figure 1) information sources such as ratings could also be cross-checked. In addition, long-term SCR charting could be a source of cross- validation for second language research studies normally carrried out longitudinally on a small number of subjects. That validation would have as a data base a formalized ESL measurement system (SCR Performance Charts) on many students, across many terms, utilized by many teachers. Last, experience with contract learning indicates a further value of long term SCR mapping: students take an interest in their progress; to a large extent the responsibility of record keeping can be left in their hands. This implies

that the motivational self teaching value of SCR mapping systems (such as contract learning) could be felt across many terms. Why not give students a stake in their own interlanguage future? Why not let them map their own development?*

Perhaps the simplest argument in favor of contract learning is one this author has already experienced, and described above. A contract is a <u>new source of measurement information</u>. Its use forces the teacher to formalize the multiple referencing advancement decision process. This is a process that intuitively should, and does, occur; however, it needs to be formally acknowledged in ESL teaching systems where advancement is based largely on test results.**

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*This is over and above the "Monitor" that Krashen (1983 and elsewhere) describes. Yes, in contract learning a student does indeed monitor his/her improvement; in addition, the student <u>measures</u> that improvement. In the second sense, such a responsibility is not "monitoring" as Krashen and others have used the term.

**TESOL has begun to acknowledge the need for multiple information sources. In its statement on competency testing (TESOL, 1979), it advises multiple measurement because the complexity of competency assessment demands that a student be given many opportunities to demonstrate mastery. As John Oller (personal communication) has suggested, perhaps we need a more broadly based professional acknowledgement of the multiple measurement information sources that impinge on an advancement decision.

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